

Plato and marshmallows

James Warren

If you thought marshmallows were only good with hot chocolate, think again! James Warren shows how useful they are in getting to grips with important aspects of Platonic argument.

Imagine I put a delicious marshmallow on a plate in front of you. I tell you that you can eat the marshmallow now if you like. But if you sit there and wait fifteen minutes without eating the marshmallow, I will give you a second marshmallow too. If you eat the one marshmallow before the fifteen minutes are up I will not give you a second marshmallow. What should you do?

The obvious answer is that, provided you have the time, you should wait. Two marshmallows are better than one. It does not matter whether you eat now or in fifteen minutes; what matters is how many marshmallows you eat. In this case, therefore, it seems to be the rational and correct thing to do to wait fifteen minutes for two marshmallows rather than eat one marshmallow now.

Not everyone will wait for fifteen minutes to secure two marshmallows instead of one. In tests, children under the age of six often find the situation extremely difficult. Approximately only one third of children asked to undergo this test will wait fifteen minutes. Others find it too hard to bide their time; they take the marshmallow there in front of them and forgo the second. (Interestingly, studies have found a significant correlation between higher test scores later in a child's schooling and their ability at the age of six to wait for the second marshmallow.)

Food for thought

Why is it difficult? The children know that they will get a second marshmallow if they wait; fifteen minutes is not a very long time (even for a small child); and we imagine that they all prefer more marshmallows to fewer. Perhaps it is because one marshmallow is available at that very moment. They can have a marshmallow now.

This might sound a long way from the world of Platonic philosophy. But this experiment sheds some interesting empirical light on a topic that surfaces towards the end of Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*. The conversation abruptly changes tack and turns to the question of what makes a life good or bad. Socrates and the famous

sophist Protagoras agree, with some qualifications, that it is reasonable to think that good things are pleasant and bad things are painful. We might sometimes say that it is good to go to the dentist to have a filling, although the procedure is painful, but this is just a way of saying that over all, going to the dentist and having a filling will produce in the long term less pain and more pleasure than avoiding the dentist's drill but soldiering on with a long-lasting discomfort.

From this, it should follow that a life with more pleasure and less pain in it is better than a life with less pleasure and more pain. So how do we go about making our lives better in this way? Socrates and Protagoras are both in the business of helping people to lead better lives. Protagoras certainly thinks that he can teach people something useful, so they both agree that wisdom is what is needed to make a life better, namely more pleasant and less painful. But Socrates reminds them that not everyone will agree. Many people, he says, will claim that it is possible to know what the better course of action is but fail to do it. For example, someone might know that it would be better over all to go to the dentist, or better over all not to drink that extra drink at the party, but do so nevertheless. Why? Because, the many say, they are 'overcome by pleasure or pain, or love or fear'. This is a problem for the two philosophers, because if the many are right then it is possible for someone who is wise nevertheless to fail to live the best life possible. The power of reason, knowing the better thing to do, might lose out to some other compulsion.

Perhaps this is what goes wrong with those people who eat the one marshmallow before the fifteen minutes are up. Perhaps children are prone to this kind of problem because their reasoning power is not yet sufficiently strong. But even adults might still be prone to the same sort of mistake in other circumstances. Is it possible to know that one course of action is better than another but choose the worse option nevertheless?

Socrates thinks the many are mistaken. He thinks that what they call being overcome by pleasure, pain, love, or fear, is not

a case of reason being overcome but rather of reason simply making a mistake. If someone chooses the worse option rather than the better, it is because they do not in fact fully and properly know that the option they choose is worse. They think, at least at the time the decision is taken, that it is better to do as they do. In that case, they simply need to get better at reasoning out the better course of action, and that is something Socrates hopes that philosophy can help people to do.

Socrates' view is that people often choose the worse of two options because they mistakenly prefer something worse but closer at hand (closer in time or space) to something better but more remote (in time or space). So, someone might think that one marshmallow here and now is better than two marshmallows in fifteen minutes' time. Or a day without a dental appointment today is better than a week of toothache later. Call this a 'bias to the near'. Socrates thinks this is simply irrational: it does not matter when something good occurs in a life; all that matters is that over all a life should contain as many good things and as few bad things as possible. Call this a 'temporally neutral' account of value. He thinks that we can learn to avoid this bias.

He uses an analogy. We might initially think that something closer at hand is larger than something further away even though in fact the further thing is larger. This is because the relative distances of the two create a misleading appearance: the smaller but nearer item looks larger. But we can resist the appearance by measuring the two and comparing them, using our reason as a check against the immediate appearance. Similarly, he thinks, things that are nearer in time often misleadingly appear to be better than things further in time. So we ought to cultivate a skill in accurately measuring and evaluating different possible objects of choice by disregarding when they will occur and thinking only about their true value. If we really know that a later object is better than a sooner object then there is no chance of choosing the worse option nevertheless. Reason is never overcome in this way. What the many think is a case of being overcome is really just their not properly knowing which option is better. They choose the option they think at the time is better but are often misled by these tricks of perspective. So there is still a

chance for people to learn the relevant skill and ensure they do not make these mistakes. For Socrates, the children who scoff the one marshmallow just need to practise and acquire the correct skill at working out what is really the better course of action. And adults who similarly make mistakes and prefer a smaller but nearer good to a later but greater good are in need of coaching too.

Philosophy at the University of Cambridge where he is renowned for his sharp mind and sweet tooth.

Half-baked?

There are various ways to object to Socrates' view. Here are some possibilities; you might be able to think of some more. Perhaps we might say that it is sometimes right to choose the nearer but lesser good simply because we can be more certain of obtaining it. (Perhaps I do not trust you to give me two marshmallows in fifteen minutes' time and decide I shall take the one available to me now.) This is not going to bother Socrates. He wants only to insist that we always choose what we think, over all and taking into account all the relevant factors, is the better course of action. If I think you are unscrupulous then I might well be right not to risk waiting.

Perhaps we might say to Socrates that we think something closer is indeed better than something more remote just because it is closer. In fact, although he prefers a temporally neutral account, Socrates might be able to accommodate this too. If we think that the value of something is discounted according to its temporal distance, then all he will say is that once again what we need to do is work out the true value of all the options available and then choose the better one; it does not matter to the point he wants to make here what the unit of that measurement is (number of marshmallows, amount of pleasure or pain, or something else) or what factors are relevant to determining the relative values of the options available. He simply wants us to agree that we do in fact act always by choosing what we think is the better option available. Certainly, we never truly think that an alternative is better but choose what we think is a worse option. He is making a descriptive point: this is how he thinks we do all always act.

Better, perhaps, to tackle Socrates on these terms and wonder whether his position is empirically true. Do the children who cannot wait fifteen minutes think, when they scoff the marshmallow, that this is the better option? Or do they eat it thinking all the time that it would have been better to wait? How could we tell? How could we determine whether Socrates is right about the psychological factors involved? Time, perhaps, for another experiment.

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